

Macedonia's 2011 Independence Day Interview with Stevo Pendarovski

By Sam Vaknin

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I have been fortunate to meet Stevo Pendarovski several times, in his official capacities, and “for coffee”. On all occasions, I found him to be level-headed, incisively analytical, and a true public intellectual. At the same time, his views are never trite, or conventional. He always introduces new, surprising angles into old and apparently worn-out debates. In this sense, he is a stealth iconoclast.

Currently, Stevo Pendarovski is an Assistant Professor in International Security, Foreign Policy and Globalization at the School of Political Science at UACS.

In the 1990's he was an Assistant Minister for Public Relations and Head of the Analytical and Research Department in the Ministry of Interior Affairs of the Republic of Macedonia.

In the last decade he has served as National Security and Chief Foreign Policy Advisor to two Presidents of the Republic of Macedonia. In 2004/2005 was Head of the State Election Commission.

His teaching and research areas include International Relations, Intelligence and National Security, Geopolitics, Globalization, US Foreign Policy, EU Foreign and Security Policy, Small States in International Affairs.

We conducted this interview amidst the heat wave – literal and figurative – that engulfed [Skopje](#) in August 2011.

SV: How will recent developments in Kosovo and Serbia affect inter-ethnic relations in Macedonia and the Ohrid Framework Agreement? How fragile is the coalition between VMRO and DUI?

SP: In the post-communist Balkans, the regional security dynamic has always been stronger than the national ones. We have witnessed its strength during most of the 1990s in the triangle Serbia- Bosnia-Croatia; it is still valid within the triad Kosovo- South Serbia – Macedonia.

In other words: in the short run, the de facto independent north of Kosovo will not present a security threat to Macedonia, but if a partition of Kosovo is eventually executed by the

mutual consent of Belgrade and Pristina, even the perfect implementation of the Framework Agreement in Macedonia cannot save the country from troubles.

I have no doubts that, as far as the daily political routine goes, the Albanian party in the Macedonian Government - DUI - will remain committed to the local constitutional context, but if strategic challenges arise, than all Albanians in the region will reconsider their status in an integral way. Whenever it deals with ordinary political issues the ruling coalition is going to be strong, in line with the combined numbers of its MPs in the Parliament, but, when faced with strategic challenges each of the coalition's constituents will look exclusively to their ethnic kin. In the former situation politicians will think about their individual and political gains, in the latter one, they will always make wider calculations about their peoples' gains in the historical perspective.

In the period prior to the Ahtisaari Agreement the Macedonian leadership have repeated numerous times to their foreign interlocutors that a partition of Kosovo should be dangerous for Macedonia on the same scale as an independent state if it were to treat the regional borders as in a perpetual flux. Therefore in Skopje we were pleased to see point No. 6 of the Contact Group document from October 2005 which forbids the partition of Kosovo or its union with any country, or part of any country in the region.

Despite the propaganda going on in parallel in both capitals my understanding of the negotiations between Belgrade and Pristina is that the status of Kosovo is not going to be on the table as well as the status of the Serb-dominated north Kosovo. The prime Serbian goal is to maintain the status quo and keep the problem indefinitely on the list of frozen international conflicts.

Internally, before the border blockades happened, Serbs have been relatively successful in persuading their public that the status of Kosovo is still up in the air and that the transfer to The Hague of the remaining war criminals is the last demand of "western civilization" from the Serbian people before they obtain the status of an EU candidate country.

The action of the special forces of Pristina which, by the way, has a long history of close cooperation with western capitals even on the most benign issues, possessed the "right" timing: its sole aim was to corner Serbia in the last possible moment before the mechanics of the EU negotiations automatically assume the lead.

Today the bar for Serbia's EU entry is set far higher than before, but it is still reachable if smaller adjustments are made by the Belgrade authorities.

Anyhow, in the long term, Macedonia may be caught in a very unpleasant encirclement with one internationally semi-recognized neighbor with an internal division along ethnic lines and another neighbor frozen on the road to the EU, in Turkey-like style. History teaches us that whenever the borders are reconsidered it always provokes debates about territorial compensation. Compared to the Serbian and Albanian overall potentials, Macedonia is by far the weakest link in the chain in demographic, political, economic, military and strategic terms.

SV: What does Macedonia hope to achieve by joining NATO? Is Macedonia ready for challenges like asymmetric and low-intensity warfare and terrorism?

SP: The long-held illusion of Macedonia's citizens is that NATO membership, by default, secures the future of the state. Ignorance is immense among ordinary people and politicians alike, both of whom fail to understand that collective territorial defense has nothing to do with eventual domestic contradictions and tensions. This was demonstrated in Macedonia in 2001 when the so-called internal geopolitics was in place, with Macedonians and Albanians competing for the same resources and territory, at least in the initial stages of the conflict.

It is not necessary for NATO to teach us to be effective in asymmetric warfare or the fight against terrorism since I am not convinced at all that the Alliance in itself is capable of countering these threats. NATO has done a great job in Macedonia in the 1990s and afterwards, by assisting the Macedonian Army to re-structure itself from an organization of conscripts into an army of professionals. NATO is even more needed in the field of security socialization, in pushing the regional armies towards building mutual trust and cooperation. The end state of this activity should be to definitely bury the notion still alive in the minds of many people that the former Yugoslavia was a respected and influential member of the international community because it allegedly possessed the "forth strongest army" in Europe.

SV: Why did Macedonia's belated drive to join the EU stall? Is the Name Dispute the only obstacle - or are there other factors and considerations?

SP: Formally, in the 2008 Bucharest Summit (when Macedonia was not invited to join NATO – SV) the problem was the name dispute; informally, to some extent, it is the EU's enlargement fatigue.

It's obvious that in the last three years Europeans are more ready than before to leverage regional disputes or somebody's poor preparedness for delaying the entry of new members. The latest example has been the extraordinarily difficult negotiation rounds with Croatia, which have only enhanced the impression that the building up of "fortress Europe" is going on uninterrupted.

Having said that, I do not have a slightest intention to "pardon" the incumbent Macedonian politicians, who have sidelined the negotiations with Greece and, instead became engaged in something which can be vaguely described as a "cultural awakening of the nation". With the costly and controversial project "Skopje 2014" and the accompanying populist policies, we became indistinguishable from the century old Greek nationalism which was barely tolerated by Brussels and Washington only a few years ago.

By modifying your question, I will attempt to give an answer regarding the potential of the dispute: the name is still the only obstacle in Macedonia's road towards the EU, but, waiting to resolve it for too long will produce many other obstacles. Since the double integration agenda has been pushed to the margins we now lack the so-called EU conditionality which argues for the adoption of EU standards in different areas. Thus, it is not a surprise to note that we were the recipients of depressing descriptions in a few crucial sectors of society in last year's EU progress report. All available data indicate that negative trends in the judiciary, public administration, freedom of the media, and inter-ethnic relations have been amplified in the meantime.

SV: What role does and will Russia play in the region? Its influence and involvement seem to have waned a bit.

SP: After the fall of communism, Russia has never played a significant role in the Balkans until the issue of Kosovo's independence emerged on the scene. Even today Russia's prime strategic interests are not situated anywhere near the region. Moscow is using the remaining regional problems only to boost its own comeback onto the world stage, but otherwise Russian influence is rather limited: apart from some occasional flirting, regional nations are not interested in accepting the hybrid political models emanating from Moscow. Even the often-cited energy-led penetration is far from omnipotent: current energy dependence on the Russian gas and oil in Germany, for example, is bigger than in Serbia.

All Macedonian political elites since 1991 have encountered conceptual problems in Macedonia's bilateral relations with the Russian Federation. Judging by the official political rhetoric utilized in the past, the former superpower had been considered as our strategic partner on equal footing with the USA or the European Union. All of that happened in the period when Russia had serious structural problems, a poor democratic record and a firmly declared opposition to the enlargement of both NATO and the EU.

What is needed for the future is an absolutely pragmatic approach which should avoid the vocabulary of "traditional" friendship or "Orthodox" alliances. A relevant foreign policy paradigm should take into consideration only the remaining dimension of Russia's super-power status, namely its energy exports. Searching for other political alternatives would be a waste of precious time.

Nevertheless, I have to be honest about the "schemes" of the other side: I have never heard any Russian representative offering to his regional counterparts political alternatives to the dominant western models. Moreover: concerning Macedonia, Russia has never been against our membership in NATO, they have only given us a warning against eventually allowing foreign military installations on the Macedonian soil.

SV: In hindsight, what were the true causes of the conflict in Macedonia in 2001?

SP: In 1991, with Yugoslavia on its deathbed, the so-called Council of Albanian Political Parties was established with the aim of coordinating the activities of all the political organizations of the Albanians. Besides making the case for an independent Kosovo, the conclusions of the Council have supported the upgrading of the constitutional status of the Albanians in Macedonia and that line of reasoning remained as the basic point of departure for Albanian politicians ever since.

However, the ethnic Macedonian political elite harboured another vision. Even today, one will have difficulties finding significant number of Macedonians who will admit that the country has a history of the exclusion of its Albanian citizens.

Anyhow, throughout the 1990s, processes of nation-building were in full swing as the mere continuation from communism. Ethnic Macedonians were in charge in all layers of power structures, even in the least important institutions. However, the building of the new Republic

was seriously challenged on several occasions as ethnic Albanians have disputed the entrenched power-sharing mechanisms.

After the Kosovo war in 1999, it became clear that apart from international conferences and negotiations, political gains or status changes can be accomplished by the use of guns. It is correct to say that in the early phases of the conflict in 2001 some powerful fractions within the NLA (with Kosovo's backing) have clearly opted for a territorial demarcation (secession – SV) from the ethnic Macedonians, but in April-May of the same year, foreign intermediaries have persuaded them to push only for constitutional changes within the nominally unitary state.

In summing up, I would like to structure my personal views on 2001 around three theses: first, the Framework Agreement does not possess a potential to divide Macedonia in and by itself; second, most of the provisions and obligations stemming from the FA should have been accepted by the ethnic Macedonians a decade ago; and third, I have never ever in my life been ready to accept the use of violence as legitimate in politics.

SV: In the wake of September 11, the USA seems to have abandoned the region altogether. Do you feel that this is so and do you think that the EU can fulfill the geopolitical and military gap?

SP: As time goes by it seems to me that 9/11 has only effectively covered the early stages of the ongoing American strategic reorientation of turning to Asia. Plus, by 2001, the US had finished the crude work in Europe by offering a security umbrella for the continent until the EU has almost completed the unification of its two halves.

Had the opposite been true and 9/11 had really been a crucial moment for the US to decide to leave the region and Europe as a whole, we should have expected a big comeback of the superpower after it had completed its (un)successful war on terrorism. But, it is apparent that the US does not have a job left to do in Europe as the emerging, new superpowers are not of European origin.

The EU has never been intended to fill in the geopolitical and military gap, or even the economic one, which honestly has not been on the US agenda either, ever since the Marshall plan. It is notable that virtually all the crises in the former Yugoslavia have been resolved (more or less successfully) by the US, while the EU had been only a silent follower in what was publicly promulgated as a bipartisan endeavor. I really do believe that Europeans have never contemplated filling in the military and security vacancies in the Balkans. As far as the regional peoples are concerned, they should realistically ask the EU only for lessons on building sustainable democratic societies.

SV: Is militant Islam on the rise or on the wane in the region in general and in Kosovo and Macedonia in particular?

SP: I would like to contradict the popular belief by saying that militant Islam in the region was at its peak during the Balkan wars 1992-1995, and not, as many have suggested, after the 9/11 events.

Why is it so? The Muslims in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Albanians of Kosovo have been known for their secularism even in the former Yugoslavia. In Kosovo, up till now, no

political or security subject with a clear Muslim background has become relevant. In Sarajevo, the current connections between the SDA and Islam are certainly not stronger than the ties that exist between the Turkish Justice and Development Party and Islam and in my view that mixture in Ankara does not produce terrorism.

Additionally, in the Balkans we have never come close to the point of believing that some political party with Muslim roots is controlling parts of the army or the intelligence services, as was and is still the case, for example, in Lebanon.

It is true that in the past two years western intelligence services have recorded a few cases of terrorist plots in the US and Europe being organized by Muslims from the Balkans, but I am inclined to classify them as individual incidents, not as a systemic rise of radical Islam with a Balkan flavor. When comparing the potential levels of threat it seems to me that groups from the second and the third generations of emigrants who failed to integrate with western EU countries should be more closely scrutinized than the Balkan's Muslim youth.

As a former analyst in the Interior Ministry, I certainly am not prone to minimizing security threats with a religious background, but, in my view anyone who considers the Muslims in the region, en masse, as a potential breeding ground for terrorists is grossly exaggerating the state of affairs. Internationally, jihad is losing its global appeal, but, of course that does not call for passivity on the part of the intelligence services. What I am trying to say is that at present, mad ideas about changing the world by using terrorism reside much more on the personal than on the community or collective level.

SV: Can you foresee a dominant regional role for China and Turkey?

SP: China's global penetration is based on its search for resources and political influence and despite persistent local perceptions the Balkans has never been a big reservoir of both. So China is not going to be predominantly present in the region for exactly the same reasons the US has left a decade ago. Local Chinese retail outlets, the incursion of the Chinese textile industry, Chinese capital in Greece's ports etc, are only the side-effects of the grand re-designing of international affairs. With a territory half of that of France or Ukraine, the Balkans is far from suitable to be a centerfield of global influence. And for sure, the clash of the titans will not happen in Macedonia.

My belief is that Turkey as a well-established regional power with global ambitions has already reached the limits of its potential. The same judgment could be applied to Turkey's influence in the region: it is stronger than 10 years ago, but it will probably maintain similar proportions 10 years from now.

When approaching the Balkans, Turkey is burdened with the so-called "identification" dilemma and its strategic strength may also be its strategic weakness. When it over-emphasizes historical ties and similar cultural bonds as demanded by some local people, Turkey alienates others which do not share the same religious and cultural background. The same goes for the wider role of the "Giant from Bosphorus": as it approaches the world predominantly with its "Islamic" face, Turkey's influence is felt mostly between Sarajevo and Baku. Had, instead, Ankara offered a combination of secularism and mild Islamism, it could have served as a role model for reshaping the Arab world.

Our biggest omission in the bilateral relations with Turkey in the past two decades has been preferring emotions, expatriates and common history over its huge economic potential. And of course, we are making a mistake whenever using Turkey as a shield against Greece's offensive nationalism. Macedonia can win only if it manages to have both countries on the same side of history.

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